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The Japanese Woman Suffrage Movement in Comparison with the American Movement, by Ryoko Kurihara. Shinzansha Publishing Co., Ltd., 2001.

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Description

This volume is a useful primer on what surely was a key development in the women's movement of Japan. It focuses on the efforts of two main women's organizations, and their two main leaders, to make women's suffrage a reality in the century leading up to the second world war. As well, it provides a comparison with corresponding events leading to suffrage in the United States. ***The Japanese Woman Suffrage Movement in Comparison with the American Movement*** is a revision of Ryoko Kurihara's master's thesis, written in 1985.

The initial two chapters of the book are introductory in nature. The first is an overview of Japanese suffrage histories by both Japanese and U.S. historians, and of U.S. American suffrage histories. Kurihara briefly enumerates key histories of Japanese women's suffrage, for example, those of Yoshimi Kaneko and Kodama Katsuko, and Ide Fumiko's examination of the impact of feudalism on the women's suffrage movement. Kano Masanao and Nishikawa Yuko's works are described, showing the relationship of the suffrage movement to the war in the 1930's. Kurihara sets the stage by pointing to the role of rising militarism in the women's and political movements in the 1930's. Mention of a number of U.S. American scholars of the Japanese women's suffrage movement follows. U.S. historians of the American women's suffrage movement described include participants Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Eleanor Flexnor, among others. Just as Japanese historians saw the link between suffrage and political movements, so historian William O'Neill saw the U.S. women's suffrage movement in relation to the socialist movement. Kurihara also discusses Ellen DuBois, who focused on race and class and argued for understanding the movement in its own time.

The second chapter gives historical context for Japan in the late 1800's and early 1900's. With the Meiji restoration came legal and scientific and technical changes, yet the social system remained patriarchal and authoritarian. It was in this context that the question of women's suffrage was taken up. At the same time the popular rights movement gained momentum. Kurihara points out that while not all activists saw the connection between the two, some did, notably Ueki Emori, who was influenced by U.S. American philosophers Herbert Spencer and John Stuart Mill. A short-lived period followed in which women were able to vote in some parts of the nation. However, this and the popular rights movement were suppressed by the government. Notions of an "ideology of motherhood," advocated by the Women's Christian Temperance Movement, did little to challenge the social control over women. Rather, it was the movement of socialists that advocated political rights and the abolishment of oppression of women in the social system. Kurihara presents these events as setting the stage for the development of the women's movement in general and the

women's suffrage movement in particular.

The chapter on the Association of New Women, established in 1919, describes the short but important history of the group whose intent was to secure women's entrance into Japanese politics and to prevent syphilitic men from marrying. As described by Kurihara, the organization had three founders. Hiratsuka Raicho rejected convention of marriage, but felt the role of motherhood was more significant than political or economic roles in society. Ichikawa Fusae was originally recruited by Hiratsuka, but her focus on political rights for women soon led to a falling out. Ichikawa traveled to the United States, where she was profoundly influenced by her observation of organizations in the women's movement and its leaders there. Oku Mumeo was the third founder of the Association, and was most concerned with issues of labor and class differences. Never growing to a large organization, the Association of New Women disbanded in 1922, after three years. Kurihara asserts, however, that the organization played a significant role in the raising of feminist issues.

It was Ichikawa Fusae who formed the Woman Suffrage League of Japan in 1924 (originally the League for the realization of Woman Suffrage), the focus of the next chapter. Ichikawa saw suffrage as central to the emergence of broader women's rights. Bills for women's political participation and national and local women's suffrage went before the Diet, but it was men's universal suffrage that was granted in 1925. This gave rise to a number of proletarian, socialist and communist parties, but whether the fortunes of the women's suffrage movement should be tied to other political movements was controversial. The advent of the 1929 depression prompted broader consideration of women's suffrage as a remedy for social and economic ills, but bills brought before the Diet continued to be defeated. The one near-exception was a bill to permit women to vote in the assembly elections of municipalities. The Woman Suffrage League withheld support in favor of unrestricted voting rights, and in any case, the bill was defeated.

The story of the Woman Suffrage League from 1931 to 1940 continues in the following chapter. With the economic crisis at hand, the Japanese government became increasingly militaristic. The Woman's Defense Organization was formed to assist soldiers and their families, and to foster social reform. Women flocked to this patriotic organization, which in turn diminished the impact of both the suffrage issue and the Woman Suffrage League. In addition, Ichikawa began to stress the desirability of peace, and the idea that the votes of women could promote peace. This and government pressure shifted the women's movement away from politics and toward social issues (such as education, health, and social services), in effect reshaping the energies of women to support the traditional social structure. Indeed, Ichikawa herself was co-opted into participating in government-organized women's groups as conservative and militaristic elements gained ascendance in the government. While she continued to campaign for women's suffrage, it had become a dead issue by 1937. The League achieved some small victories at home, e.g. economic support for war widows, and successfully linked itself to international women's organizations. However, as the decade moved to a close, women's organizations increasingly became subverted to nationalism, as did Ichikawa's views. Again and again in this chapter, Kurihara points to the contradiction between

Ichikawa's professed ideology and her activities, which served the purpose of those in authority. The Woman Suffrage League was dissolved in 1940, and remaining women's organizations were directed by male members of government ministries, ostensibly to pursue "feminine virtue," i.e. the traditional roles within the home and community.

In "Chapter VI – Observations and Conclusions: The Japanese Woman Suffrage Movement," Kurihara provides an overview of the events described in the foregoing chapters. She then examines the way in which the social and political forces, increasingly authoritarian and totalitarian, bent the ideologies of the women's suffrage organizations, and other women's organizations, to its will. In particular, Kurihara elaborates on the "spiritual aspects of Japanese fascism" (p.119) expressed in published principles and guidelines, namely preservation of the family system in which women's only role is service to the husband and children, and erasure of individuality in service to the state (i.e. the emperor). In this climate, she points to the impossibility of the Woman Suffrage Movement achieving its aims. Arguing that Ichikawa (and the Movement) essentially doomed their cause by limiting it to a narrow political aim, Kurihara suggests that fighting on a broader front (family, birth control, sexuality) and remaining independent of the government organizations would have offered some chance of having a real impact.

The final chapter of this book takes the reader into the realm of the U.S. women's suffrage movement. Kurihara begins by pointing to the role of religion in this movement – revivalism encouraged people to live the doctrine of their faith by doing good works in the community. Another characteristic cited was the ideology of women's moral superiority over men. In these circumstances, the Women's Christian Temperance Movement was formed to promote abstinence (particularly of men) from alcohol, as well as legal and political equality between men and women. Still another large influence was the movement to abolish slavery of African Americans, also rooted in the religious and political conviction. Kurihara traces the history of the Seneca Falls Convention, where temperance, suffrage, and social reformers met, and of the formation of the American Equal Rights Association, which promoted suffrage for blacks and women. These events, transpiring in the wake of the bloody U.S. Civil War to emancipate black slaves, resulted in factions competing for backs' and women's suffrage. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who figures largely in these events, insisted that women should be enfranchised first, but revealed in her campaigning a penchant for elitism and racism. Kurihara notes that both the movements in Japan and the U.S. were radical efforts to transform society; however, in Japan the lack of religious or democratic ideology meant that the suffrage movement could not withstand the opposing forces of the dominant culture. She also compares the impact of war (World War II for Japan and World War I for the U.S.), noting that in both cases, suffragists supported the war causes, but only in the American case, did this lead to success in obtaining the vote.

The final focus of this book involves comparisons of suffrage leaders. A very brief comparison of Ichikawa Fusae and Carrie Chapman Catt (a key leader and twice president of the National American Woman Suffrage Association) is made, primarily noting similarities. An extensive

section then compares Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Hiratsuka Raicho, both founders of the suffrage movements in their respective countries. Both Stanton and Hiratsuka promoted the notion that the role of motherhood was primary in society, and ought not to be a mechanism for suppressing women. Both also radically opposed the legal and social inequities imposed by the marriage state, albeit championing true marriage love itself. Finally, the author notes that both willfully violated the taboos of the day by openly discussing women's sexuality and related issues, such as abortion, licentiousness, and virginity.

Analysis

This volume is a valuable and informative contribution for the student of feminist movements, especially in Japan, and especially as to how the Japanese movement relates to its U.S. counterpart. Readers will find the survey of Japanese suffrage efforts an essential account for understanding the larger feminist movement in Japan. Further, Kurihara's extensive knowledge of U.S. American culture is especially helpful in the contrastive analysis, showing social, political, and religious forces on the suffrage movements in their respective countries.

Some readers may find some awkwardness in the book's organization. As indicated above, the book is divided in its attention to the flow of historical events in the struggle for the legal right to votes in Japan and the U.S., and the roles of key players on these historical stages. The in-depth portrayal of the Japanese suffrage movement, with its intensive look at the movement's leaders (especially Ichikawa) form what initially seems to be the core of the book. Then, the long chapter comparing the U.S. American movement dwells on religious and ideological underpinnings of both movements, the impacts of war on the suffrage campaigns, and then a comparison of the founding leaders, Stanton and Hiratsuka. The latter section systematically compares these leaders' positions on suffrage; the ideology of motherhood; love, marriage, and divorce; and sexuality and birth control. This last chapter covers new – and admittedly fascinating - ground, some of which falls outside the topic of suffrage history into other, equally compelling feminist issues. However, the overall effect is one of disjointedness. Stronger editorial advising might have assisted the author to smoothly integrate the content, allowing the Japanese suffrage movement, with its key leaders and systematic comparison to corresponding events in the U.S. movement, to drive this history through to its end. Better editing by the publisher's staff also might have forestalled the numerous punctuation and mechanical errors.

Along with the weaving of disparate threads of history into a single cloth, historians also face the difficulty of balancing an overarching narrative that ties events together to provide perspective for the reader, with the unrelenting enumeration of facts, dates, names, and quotations. Kurihara struggles with this no less than others, and in some cases, the details of organizational events, quotations from letters, speeches, and documents, and other necessary facts could use more narrative framing, reinforcing a coherent picture for the reader.

Nonetheless, Kurihara's book powerfully reveals the astonishing courage of the feminist movements' leaders, in both countries, to openly brand systematic societal control and oppression of

women for what it was. We see from her description the near-overwhelming resistance, especially in the Japanese context, to the relinquishing of power by conservative elements of the government, and the refusal to admit or see the destructive consequences of this oppression – not just for women, but for children, society, and for men themselves, deprived of any value from women's intelligence in the solution to societal problems.

Indeed, Kurihara's work does a significant service to the field of feminist studies by pointing to two areas which are ripe for further development. First, the step-wise subversion of Ichikawa Fusae's ideology and politics in the increasingly authoritarian political context is as revealing as it is distressing. In some ways, Elizabeth Cady Stanton's increasingly open racism and educational chauvinism in the face of black suffrage (at the expense of women's suffrage) is comparable. In both cases, we see the irony of subversion of the very efforts of feminists against subversion. It illustrates vividly how societal oppression of this kind so often remains invisible to both the oppressor and even the oppressed.

Second, as Kurihara's two case histories of suffrage show, there is much to be understood about the dominant culture - men's culture - indirectly illustrated in the political scene which served as the backdrop for the suffrage campaigns. We cannot hope to fully understand women's culture in feminist studies without also understanding it in the context with men's culture. Because of this, many specialists have moved beyond the focus on a single gender to dual gender studies. (This is, incidentally, a lesson that is simultaneously being understood in studies of mainstream and minority cultural history.) We see, for example, the curious ironies in Kurihara's description of U.S. American women's power over men through their "pious activities" and "moral superiority" , while simultaneously experiencing inferior status. We also see in the late 1930's the Japanese government's harnessing of and dependence on women's energies to support the war effort in groups like the Women's Defense Organization, the Japan Women's Alliance, etc. These accounts hint at the way in which both male and female components of our societies fall into rigid roles, becoming locked into self-destructive, self-perpetuating cycles. If our purpose is to learn from the past, it merits a serious attempt at reconciling the psychosocial and sociopolitical dynamics of both women's and men's histories. Historians like Kurihara are poised now in Japan to do so.